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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003344

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: MILF SEEKS GREATER US INVOLVEMENT IN PEACE PROCESS

REF: A. MANILA 2994  
[1](#)B. MANILA 2833  
[1](#)C. MANILA 2623  
[1](#)D. MANILA 1747

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Paul W. Jones  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. During DCM and Poloff's low-key, two-day visit to Muslim Mindanao's political center in Cotabato, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Vice-Chairman Jafaar sought greater USG involvement in the GRP-MILF Peace Process. Meeting at the MILF's camp in Sultan Kudurat, Maguindanao on July 24, Jafaar hoped more direct USG engagement could help ensure Government implementation of an eventual agreement. DCM acknowledged the MILF's ejection in November 2005 of top JI and ASG terrorists from its territory, but stressed that the MILF needs to ensure that no JI or ASG remain. The current ceasefire between the MILF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines is stable and durable, according to leaders of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team, Armed Forces of the Philippines 6th Infantry Division, Bantay Ceasefire NGO, and the MILF's Jafaar. However, intra-Muslim clan conflicts still lead to occasional violence, pitting local militias against certain MILF commanders, as evidenced from the June 28-July 6 fighting in Maguindanao. Embassy plans to continue informal, low-key engagement with the MILF leadership to explore whether we can quicken the pace toward a durable peace agreement that also ensures that JI and ASG terrorists are eradicated from central Mindanao. End Summary.

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Greater USG Role in Peace Process?  
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[1](#)2. (C) Calling DCM's visit "a welcome development," Moro Islamic Liberation Front Vice-Chairman Ghazali Jafaar said he hoped the USG would play a greater, more direct role in the MILF-GRP Peace Process. DCM and Poloff heard similar comments separately from the heads of the MILF-connected Bangsamoro Development Agency and Institute for Bangsamoro Studies (IBS). Each explained that then-MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim requested such a USG role in the peace process in a letter to President Bush in 2003. All praised the Malaysian government's facilitating role. IBS Director Lingga suggested that Malaysia would also welcome direct USG support for the process, which he said would quicken the pace towards an agreement. Jafaar focused particularly on the MILF's concern over implementation of an agreement, in light of the poor experience with implementation of the 1996 Government of the Philippines - Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Agreement. He indicated that he hoped the USG would help ensure that the Government upheld its end of the agreement. He speculated that once an agreement was signed, the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) could monitor implementation of the agreement, in place of its

current role in monitoring the ceasefire. (Comment: Such an arrangement could run the risk of making permanent the current difficulties that Philippine authorities have in accessing MILF territories in pursuit of terrorists. End comment.)

13. (C) DCM outlined the significant U.S. development assistance already in place in Mindanao, while noting that the USG has no interest in seeking to supplant Malaysia's constructive role in the peace process. The USG hoped to provide additional assistance to help reintegrate former MILF fighters immediately upon conclusion of a peace agreement, as the U.S. had successfully done after the MNLF peace agreement. However, DCM continued, it would be important for the MILF to demonstrate credibly to the U.S. and international community that no remnants of JI and ASG remained in MILF zones.

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Stable Ceasefire  
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14. (C) In a command briefing from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) 6th Infantry Division in Cotabato, as well as in subsequent meetings with the Malaysian-led IMT and a non-governmental organization called "Bantay Ceasefire," the current MILF-AFP ceasefire was described as durable and stable. AFP 6th Infantry Division Commanding General Obaniana noted, however, that under the current ceasefire the AFP was not permitted to operate in approximately one third of its Area of Responsibility (AOR), without prior coordination with the MILF. IMT Chief of Mission Major-General Soheimi, who sounded very well-disposed toward the MILF, said it was clear that neither side wanted to fight

MANILA 00003344 002 OF 002

now. He said he had strong relationships with local MILF and AFP commanders, and that he and his 59 person team act as a conduit for confidence-building information about troop movements. "Bantay Ceasefire," which began monitoring the ceasefire the year before the IMT was established, continues to train and deploy civilian volunteers into the field, "armed only with cell phones." Several Bantay Ceasefire members were deploying to the scene of recent fighting early next morning. They and the IMT leadership were impressed by the MILF's ability to control its units, as well as its ability to govern in areas under its control.

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Local Feuds  
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15. (C) AFP 6th I.D. General Obaniana explained that the AFP sometimes found itself caught in the middle between feuding clans and acted as a buffer. The most recent fighting in Maguindanao was another chapter in the feud between the Ampatuan clan, which holds political power in Maguindanao Province and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and the MILF 105th Brigade Commander Ameril Kato. The Ampatuan clan controls local well-armed militias known as Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs), which exist throughout the Philippines but are armed only in Mindanao. The AFP and MILF had agreed to establish a buffer zone between themselves, and to require CVO militias to remain behind AFP lines, in order to prevent direct engagement between the CVOs and MILF commanders. General Obaniana said that President Arroyo's office was exploring ways to disarm the CVOs to avoid future violence. While all interlocutors agreed that the AFP is under overall policy control, some members of Bantay Ceasefire claimed that certain AFP commanders provide arms to CVOs.

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Local Color  
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¶6. (C) DCM and Poloff drove south of Cotabato to Shariff Aguak, the area of recent fighting and the Maguindanaoan Provincial seat. Along the well-paved two-lane road was a bustling market sporting backpacks and local goods, evidently rich farmland and busy yet poor farmers. After a thirty minute drive, a gleaming new city hall appeared, next to a sparkling compound with a gilded dome atop a mosque, with a similar compound across the street. The compound belonged to patriarch Governor Andal Amaptuan, who was at the time in Manila for the President's State of the Nation Address. The only evidence of recent fighting, which had occurred about two kilometers inland, was a compound that had served to feed refugees.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) The MILF is clearly interested in greater direct USG engagement. We intend to pursue their interest carefully to explore whether we can nudge the peace process forward, without disturbing Malaysia's constructive role, and ensure that an eventual agreement addresses the U.S. interest in ridding Mindanao of terrorists. If there is true interest, multiple elements of this Mission that are engaged in Mindanao can be brought to bear to encourage an agreement that creates a lasting peace.

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Jones